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PALESTINE REFUGEE PROBLEM

The Problem of Land Tenure, Relative to the Settlement of Arab Refugees.

The land tenure system of the Arab countries has been for a long time in a state of confusion and a source of many obstinate problems. In fact it is no exaggeration to say that this system has been the most fundamental cause for the backward socio-economic state of the region as a whole. One cannot escape coming to such a drastic conclusion upon consideration of facts such as the following:

1. In Egypt about 65% of all cultivated land is owned by 6% of all owners. Over 90% of all owners are fellahin (peasants) who own on the average less than 5 acres each. A large portion of the farming people are landless laborers or renters.

2. Similar conditions prevail in neighboring countries. Arab Palestine, Transjordan and Lebanon have a relatively large portion of the land owned directly by the small and medium cultivators. Rough estimates are 65% for the first two and 80% for Lebanon. The extreme of ownership concentration is presented by Syria and Iraq, where 60% to 70% of the land is held by a relatively small number of big landlords.

3. The majority of cultivators in these two countries are landless or near-landless share croppers or tenants. They are very poorly rewarded for their labor, and they have no incentive for the development of a prosperous agriculture.

4. At the same time, most of the large landowners (who own most of the land) are absentee lords and do not have the best interest of their land and their peasants at heart.

5. As a result of this system we find that the land is in general abused, and agriculture relatively stationary, with low yields per unit area. The major exception to this rule is Egypt, where intensive irrigation is carried out.

6. But everywhere in the region, and especially in Egypt, production per individual cultivator is extremely low. The annual income of the average peasant ranges from $50 to $150. The standard of living among the peasant masses is one of the few lowest in the world, allowing for just marginal existence.

7. There is a glaring difference between the communities of landless sharecroppers and the villages of owners-cultivators, with respect to the levels of housing, food consumption, literacy, production and progressiveness.

8. It has been demonstrated, as a result of land settlement in Transjordan and in parts of Lebanon and Syria, that the sharecropper would take a new hold on life when given free title to the land.

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9. In addition to absentee ownership and share cropping, the system presents three other serious complications, particularly in Syria and Iraq. (1) The first of these is that there are too many categories of land - mulk, masha', waqf, matruka, mewat, etc. (for explanation of these terms see attached reprint of article on land tenure in the Middle East.) A great confusion exists between these categories, with the result that in many cases the cultivator does not know under what category his land falls or what are his rights of ownership. (2) The second is that where the land is owned by independent small farmers, it is extremely fragmented. A typical farmer would own a few acres, broken into several small lots and scattered all around the village. This has been an obstinate obstacle to efficient management and production. (3) The third is that where the land is held under the masha' (communal) system, no one individual owns a specific lot. He owns a certain share of the village property, entitling him to grow crops on a certain lot one year or a few years, then shift to another lot. He is consequently barred from making any permanent improvements on the land.

The above brief analysis makes it sufficiently clear that any project which involves the settlement of the refugees away from their original home must contend with one or more of the problems presented by the prevailing land tenure system.

It is the writer's strong belief that settlement on any other basis than clear and free title to the land, upon the fulfilment of certain basic conditions by the refugees, would carry a strong possibility of dooming the project to failure. The present agricultural economics of the region are ailing and the national economics are tottering largely as a result of the chaotic and initiative-killing system of land ownership. This has also been largely responsible for the political instability that has characterized the region. It would not be wise for the United States to be identified directly or indirectly with a project which would make of the refugees (most of whom were independent cultivators-owners) landless laborers, or share croppers, or settlers on State Domain without clear rights of ownership. The resulting chaos would be readily attributed to the United States, and would be exploited by anti-American interests within and outside the region.

In case their settlement should be attempted on the basis of fee simple, where would the land come from, and possibly under what conditions?

In my estimation Egypt could not be considered a possibility in any way. It is already terribly overpopulated, its arable land is extremely limited, and there is no surplus acreage to offer to its own landless peasants, let alone outsiders. It has been suggested that Egypt might be willing to absorb a portion of the refugees, provided they were included in a deal involving the extension of a loan by the United States. Of course this could be done, with the refugees having no choice in the matter, but it would have no claim to being a real solution of the problem. In fact it would shake the faith held by the liberal elements of the Middle East in the principles of the United States, and it would accentuate the political instability existing in that country.

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